Islands in the Lake

Now notorious for its aridity and air pollution, Mexico City was once part of a flourishing lake environment. In nearby Xochimilco, Native Americans modified the lakes to fashion a distinctive and remarkably abundant aquatic society, one that provided a degree of ecological autonomy for local residents, enabling them to protect their communities’ integrity, maintain their way of life, and preserve many aspects of their cultural heritage. While the area’s ecology allowed for a wide array of socioeconomic and cultural continuities during colonial rule, demographic change came to affect the ecological basis of the lakes; pastoralism and new ways of using and modifying the lakes began to make a mark on the watery landscape and on the surrounding communities. In this fascinating study, Conway explores Xochimilco using native-language documents, which serve as a hallmark of this continuity and a means to trace patterns of change.

Richard M. Conway is Associate Professor of History at Montclair State University. A historian of colonial Latin America, his research focuses on the social and environmental history of Mexico.
Islands in the Lake

Environment and Ethnohistory in Xochimilco, New Spain

RICHARD M. CONWAY

Montclair State University
To Susan Schroeder
## Contents

*List of Illustrations*  
*Preface*  
*Acknowledgments*  

1. **Introduction**  
2. **Ecological and Political Landscapes**  
3. **Land**  
4. **Canoes and Commerce**  
5. **Demography and Society**  
6. **Crisis in the Seventeenth Century**  
7. **Late Colonial Watersheds**  
8. **Nahuatl Sources from Xochimilco**  
9. **Conclusion**  

*Glossary*  
*Bibliography*  
*Index*
Illustrations

FIGURES

2.1 Pictorial document of chinampas in Xochimilco, 1568–1569 page 103
2.2 Chinampas of don Martín Cerón Villafañez 109
4.1 Genealogy of Constantino de San Felipe, 1576 174
4.2 Property in the bequests of Constantino de San Felipe, 1576 175
4.3 Juliana’s property claims 176
4.4 Population change in Xochimilco’s jurisdiction, 1520s–1800s 190

MAPS

0.1 The Basin of Mexico, 1519 xii
0.2 Lakes Xochimilco and Chalco 3
0.3 Map of Santa María Magdalena Michcalco, 1579 4
1.1 Map of Xochimilco in the Codex Cozcatzin 62
3.1 Map of Lakes Xochimilco and Chalco, 1653 133
6.1 Map of the Ciénega and the Haciendas La Noria and San Juan de Dios 294
6.2 Detail from map of the Ciénega and the Haciendas La Noria and San Juan de Dios 295
6.3 Map of Lake Chalco, 1769, by Ildefonso Iniesta Vejarano 302
List of Illustrations

Tables

1.1 Political offices in Xochimilco’s cabildo, 1548–1563
4.1 Population figures for Xochimilco, city and jurisdiction, 1520s–1801
7.1 Census of Xochimilco, 1778
Preface

In 1987, some ten centuries after its founding on the shore of a freshwater lake, Xochimilco became a World Heritage Site. The UNESCO award recognized the remarkable, historic achievement of the city’s residents in fashioning an abundant system of wetland agriculture from the lake. Using extensive engineering works and soil dredged from the shallow waters, Native peoples created thousands of incredibly fertile, raised gardens, surrounded by an intricate network of canals, that supported first the rise of Tenochtitlan and the Aztec Triple Alliance and then, after its defeat by Spaniards and their Native American allies, Mexico City. By 1987, at a time when the region was gaining notoriety for its air pollution and aridity – and when many feared the final desiccation of what little was left of the old lakes – Xochimilco remained one of the last vestiges of the old aquatic world of the Aztecs.

To this day, Xochimilco (pronounced “so-chi-MIL-co”) retains an identity of its own, one that remains distinct from that of Mexico City, much as it had through three centuries of colonialism. Even though it was located just to the south of the epicenter of Spanish rule in North America, surprisingly, Xochimilco resembled some of the more distant, peripheral regions of New Spain: Spanish intrusion remained limited, particularly when it came to the ownership of land; the modified lake environment served as a kind of aquatic barrier against outside intervention and disruption; relatively few Spaniards and other non-Native outsiders settled in the area; and the indigenous inhabitants of the city successfully preserved much of their cultural heritage, especially as it was set down in documents written in their language, Nahuatl, many of which are still extant in the archives today. These and other colonial-era sources show us how Xochimilco maintained so much of its distinctive character over the course of a thousand years.
MAP 0.1 The Basin of Mexico, 1519. Map by Geoffrey Wallace. Causeway, lake, and island features after Vanegas (Mundy, 2015), Gibson (1964), and Horn (1997). Additional data from INEGI and USGS.
Acknowledgments

Without the guidance and generous assistance of many people, I could not have written this book. First, I would like to thank Susan Schroeder, who has taught me so much. Her kindness and graciousness are matched only by her patience and generosity. Thank you. I would also like to express my gratitude to the other members of my dissertation committee: Colin MacLachlan, for his humor and advice, and James Boyden, for all his enthusiasm and encouragement. At Cambridge University Press, I thank Cecelia Cancellaro for her support of this book. I owe tremendous debts of gratitude to Kris Lane and to Matthew Restall.

I am most grateful to the institutions that provided research support. Financial assistance was received through Tulane University when I was a student there, including the Department of History, the Lurcy Fund, and the Stone Center for Latin American Studies. The Tinker Foundation also financed preliminary research. I would like to thank the Program for Cultural Cooperation between Spain’s Ministry of Culture and United States Universities for enabling me to conduct research in Spain. The Newberry Library and its staff also deserve special thanks for making it possible for me to consult materials in the Ayer Collection, and I thank Sarah Austin and John Aubrey for their kind consideration. I am grateful to Montclair State University for funding that made possible two summer research trips, and I thank the current and former chairs of the department – Michael Whelan, Esperanza Brizuela-García, Robert Cray, and Jeff Strickland – for their advice and encouragement. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Jeff and to James Woodard. I would also like to thank Shannan Clark, Megan Moran, and Susan Goscinski.
Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to thank the many archivists and staff of Mexican repositories who have been so helpful and welcoming. The late Roberto Beristáin of the Archivo General de la Nación kindly shared his knowledge of the collections and introduced me to the archive’s rich and abundant sources. I would also thank the staff of gallery four for being so patient with my requests for documents. I very much appreciate the assistance of the archivists and librarians of the Archivo Histórico de the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, the Biblioteca Nacional de the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and the Archivo General de Notarías. Linda Arnold deserves special recognition for having generously shared her vast knowledge of Mexico City’s archival collections. The archivists of Spain’s Archivo General de las Indias and the Archivo Histórico Nacional also provided invaluable assistance. At Tulane’s Latin American Library, I thank the director, Hortensia Calvo, as well as Verónica Sánchez, María Dolores Espinosa, and Sean Knowlton. David Dressing, the library’s curator of manuscripts, was especially kind over the years and patiently taught me paleography. I am also grateful to the staff of the New York Public Library and to Jay Barksdale, in particular. The opportunity to use the Wertheim Study in the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building is much appreciated.

Faculty members and staff from my time at Tulane University have been very supportive. I thank Donna Denneen, Liz McMahon, Randy Sparks, and Justin Wolfe. The faculty and staff of the Stone Center and the Murphy Institute also offered me many opportunities and much vital assistance. Beyond Tulane, I am most grateful to James Lockhart for his interest in Xochimilco and for his indispensable wisdom. I very much appreciate his help in translating and understanding the Nahuatl documents from Xochimilco; all mistakes of transcription and translation are mine alone. I also thank Vera Candiani for encouraging me to consider the question of Xochimilco’s ecological autonomy and Gregory Luna Golya for kindly sharing his dissertation with me. Barbara Mundy has also been most generous in sharing her knowledge of the history of water in central Mexico. Sonya Lipsett-Rivera passed along citations for some fascinating sources, and Jerry Offner and Sarah Cline were so kind as to send me reproductions of an excellent set of documents. Geoff Wallace considerably improved the book by making a couple of beautiful maps. Many other scholars deserve special thanks for their support and for sharing their knowledge, among them Ida Altman, William Beezley, Arne Bialuschewski, Elizabeth Boone, Louise Burkhart, John Chuchiak, Susan Deeds, Jake Frederick, William French, Kevin
Acknowledgments

Gosner, Jonathan Graham, Robert Haskett, María Hernández-Ojeda, Susan Kellogg, W. George Lovell, James Maffie, J. Gabriel Martínez-Serna, Martin Nesvig, Michel Oudijk, Justyna Olko, Alisa Plant, Stafford Poole, John Schwaller, Amara Solari, Lisa Sousa, John Sullivan, David Tavárez, Kevin Terraciano, Camilla Townsend, Stephanie Wood, and Yanna Yannakakis. I would also like to thank the reviewers of the book manuscript for their astute criticisms and excellent recommendations.

Many colleagues and friends should be mentioned, too, especially Gregg Bocketti, Mark Lentz, and Jonathan Truitt. I am also grateful to Erika Hossekus, Bradley Benton, Mark Christensen, Spencer Delbridge, Owen Jones, Sarah Osten, Robert Schwaller, Lisa Singleton, Tatiana Seijas, Margarita Vargas-Betancourt, Dana Velasco Murillo, Peter Villella, and Ken Ward. I owe immeasurable thanks to Guillermo Náñez Falcón and William Wallace as well as to Michael Polushin and Wendy Kasinec. Michael introduced me to Latin American history and set me on the path to studying Mexico’s past. He and Wendy did so very much to help me get here. Finally, I thank my family, Colin Conway, Patricia Valerie Conway, and Jessica Ambler. I will forever be grateful for your love and support.